The first day between “Cast Lead” and “Oil Spot”

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Introduction:

The truce between Hamas and Israel was given broad coverage in the Palestinian media. It lasted for six months starting from June 19, 2008 until December 19, 2009 and included many violations and accusations on who was trying to break it. By the end of the truce, the countdown had begun for the Israeli operation, which many analysts noted was in its advanced stages and had reached the point of no return. Eventually, it took place on December 27, 2008 when Israeli war planes began bombing the Gaza Strip in what was later considered the harshest Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people since the Nakba (Catastrophe). The Israeli government dubbed the operation “Cast Lead” while Palestinian resistance factions coined the term “Oil Spot” for their campaign of rockets launching from Gaza.

The three Palestinian papers dedicated their entire front pages to the Gaza incident. All the news on these pages was related to the Israeli bombing of Gaza, in addition to statements and efforts by Palestinian leaders including President Mahmoud Abbas and the government to halt the Israeli aggression. Furthermore, the statements made by Hamas leaders inside and abroad and by the deposed government, appeared on the inside pages. Devoting the entire front page to news and special reports about what was taking place in Gaza was a sound option in that it reflected the gravity of the situation and the magnitude of the disaster in the Strip.

Al-Quds:

Al-Quds' main headline on Sunday, December 28, 2008

“Sixty war planes shell positions and homes with dozens of rockets of death” (sub-headline)

“Major Israeli massacre in the Gaza Strip”

“230 martyrs, 770 injured and the raids continue” (main headline)

The news appeared in white on a dark background and was published in eight columns. It described the event as a major massacre and was accompanied by two photos. The first, which was the bigger of the two, showed the bodies of martyrs who were victims of Israeli air strikes against the security forces compound in Gaza. The second picture showed two citizens inspecting one of the sites demolished by Israeli war planes in Rafah city.
As mentioned earlier, al-Quds allocated its entire front page to news and reports on the Israeli shelling in addition to Palestinian and Arab reactions, statements and actions for halting the aggression. They included:

- **President Abbas heads to Egypt today and conducts a series of contacts with Arab and international parties to halt the aggression (main headline)**

- **National mourning and general strike (sub headline)**

- **The President, the government and the leadership strongly condemn the aggression against the Strip (main headline)**

- **Hamas calls on Arab states to sever ties with Israel and open the Rafah Crossing (main headline)**

It is noteworthy that the paper did not mention the launch of Qassam and Grad rockets against Israeli cities adjacent to the Gaza Strip in a separate news item, but reported on it in the continuation of the main headline on page 30 as follows:

“... and al-Qassam Brigades said in their statement that they had launched a number of Russian-made Grad rockets against Israeli cities neighboring the Gaza Strip.”
What is noticeable here and also extremely important is that the paper didn’t mention the consequence of these rockets, which was the killing of an Israeli woman in Netivot. We wonder why the paper didn’t publish this important information, even though news taken from the wire agencies mentioned this information. The paper should have offered this piece of news with an appropriate amount of space, since it was an important development in the sequence of events in the first day of bombing in the Gaza Strip.

Al-Quds also published two cartoons. The first, by cartoonist Khalil Abu Arafeh, was posted on page 16. It demonstrated the series of events in the Strip from the beginning of the truce, through the siege, the massacre, the end of the truce and finally mourning.
The second cartoon was by cartoonist Nasser al-Ja’fari and showed an injured man at a bombed site with his forefinger pointing upwards (sign of martyrdom) while repeating “Our fate is now in God's hands.” [Hisbanullah wa ni3am al wakeel]

Al-Quds’ coverage was up to par in terms of the significance and scope of the event. It devoted its entire front page to reporting details of the incidents in Gaza except on news about the killing of the Israeli woman by a Grad rocket attack on the town of Netivot.

Al-Quds devoted pages 8 and 9 to pictures of what it described as “painful scenes from the Gaza Strip massacre” and “widespread popular anger and condemnation of the massacre.”
غضب جماهيري واسع استنكارا للمجزرة
Al-Ayyam:

Al-Ayyam’s lead was as follows:

“The massacre” (in bold and red).

“230 martyrs and 700 injured in Gaza” (main headline)

The news was published in white and red on a black background and extended down eight columns. It was attached with a picture of the security forces compound in City Gaza (Arafat Police City). The picture showed bodies and the remains of police officers. The news and picture occupied more than half of the front page.

 Similar to al-Quds, al-Ayyam devoted its entire front page to the Gaza events from all angles. It published statements and Palestinian, Arab and international reactions in addition to news about solidarity campaigns and blood drives in the West Bank. Following are some of the headlines:

- “The blood of West Bankers on its way to those injured in Gaza” (main headline)
“The President held talks with Jordanian and Saudi kings and made contacts to stop the aggression.”

**Hanif: We will not retreat even if they eradicate Gaza** (main headline)

In regards to reporting on the Israeli woman killed in Netivot by a Grad rocket, al-Ayyam published the news in the continuation of the main news item on page 17 as follows:

“Israeli woman killed and four injured in Netivot:”

“It was also reported that one Israeli woman was killed in the city of Netivot, in southern Israel by a rocket launched from the Gaza Strip, according Israeli emergency services.”

Although the paper did not give enough importance to the news on its front page and merged it in the continuation of the main news, the fact that it gave all this information means its reporting allowed for a more comprehensive image of the incident than al-Quds newspaper.

The cartoon was abstract but clear in its implications. It was a picture of a person screaming over a body. The cartoon was entirely in red, an implication of death. Above it were the words, “Save Gaza.”
The coverage by al-Ayyam was more comprehensive than al-Quds, although it did not cover the killing of the Israeli woman sufficiently by reporting it separately on the front page. However, it is noteworthy that the paper published the names of some martyrs in Gaza on its front page.

Al-Ayyam devoted page 19 (the page before the last) to scenes from Gaza entitled: “Scenes from the Israeli massacre in Gaza.”
مشاهد من المجزرة الإسرائيلية في غزة
Alhayat Aljadeedah:

Alhayat Aljadeedah opted to use the following title for its lead:

“One thousand martyrs and injured on the Saturday of Slaughter” (main headline)

The news was published together with a picture of the same site which was chosen by al-Quds and al-Ayyam papers. It was the picture of martyrs killed during the Israeli bombardment. The main news and picture occupied half of the front page and were published down eight columns. The paper chose a black background for its front page instead of white as a symbol of mourning. It was an appropriate choice, which adapted the familiar front page to these exceptional events within the course of the years-long occupation over Palestine.

On the other hand, the paper was mistaken in its deliberate or accidental exaggeration in phrasing the main news. It calculated the number of martyrs and injured together when it wrote “One thousand martyrs and injured.” Such wording makes it difficult for the reader to differentiate between the number of martyrs and those injured, which may cause confusion in reporting the information.

Al-Hayyat al-Jadeedah did not use the term “massacre” in describing the event. Contrary to al-Quds and al-Ayyam, it used the term “Saturday of Slaughter.” The term offers something new as opposed to “massacre,” which is a term exhausted by the Palestinian media and which the reader is familiar with. It should be considered, however, that the current events in Gaza are the closest to a “massacre.”

Al-Hayyat al-Jadeedeh differed from al-Quds and al-Ayyam in dealing with news of the Israeli woman killed in a rocket strike on Netivot. It was the only paper which gave the news the appropriate amount of importance by publishing it separately on the front page:

“One Israeli woman killed by a rocket in Netivot” (main headline)

Al-Hayyat al-Jadeedah devoted the rest of its front page to headlines related to the Gaza events similar to al-Quds and al-Ayyam. Some of its headlines are as follows:

• “The government announces a state of emergency in the health sector and calls on health ministry staff to head to hospitals in Gaza” (main headline)

• “[The President] met the Saudi and Jordanian kings, called al-Assad and will head to Egypt today” (sub headline).

• The president holds urgent contacts to convene an emergency session of the Security Council (main)
الف شهيد وجريح في السبت البحـ
Hayyat al-Jadeedah’s cartoon dealt with the Gaza bombing. It was drawn by cartoonist Muhammad Saba’net and published on the last page. It illustrated a mother holding her martyred child who was covered with blood. She was crying and saying “They blocked the borders of the land to you, but God has opened the gates of heaven.” The implications here are very clear. The land borders refer to the Israeli siege, while heaven’s gates imply martyrdom. On the devastation from the Israeli shelling, the cartoonist says: “We will not kneel before anyone other than God.”

Al-Hayyat al-Jadeedah published images of Gaza entitled: “Gaza massacre in pictures.”
It also devoted page 19 to report on events in the West Bank and Arab and Islamic countries. The picture was entitled “Confrontations and marches in solidarity with Gaza.”
Al-Hayyat al-Jadeedah’s coverage of the first day of the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip was appropriate and proportional to the event and its importance. The paper’s front page
described the feelings of sorrow, desperation and mourning felt by the Palestinians for the loss of their people in Gaza.

**Conclusions:**

- The coverage of the three Palestinian papers of Israel’s bombardment of Gaza differed in the terms used to describe the event and in the number of martyrs and injured. Thus, al-Hayyat al-Jadeedah could have reported the news more accurately to avoid any confusion about such important information.

- It should be mentioned that Palestinian papers did avoid the erroneous terms used by many international and Arab media outlets such as the “Gaza war” or “the war on Gaza” given that this implies the existence of two equally strong parties.

- The three papers gave appropriate coverage to the magnitude and scope of the event, since they devoted the entire front pages to Gaza in addition to the inside pages for pictures, reports, articles and cartoons.

- Al-Hayyat al-Jadeedah was unique in reporting the news of the Israeli woman killed in a rocket attack on Netivot. It allocated a separate space for it on the front page, which was not the case in al-Quds and al-Ayyam. The former did not report on it at all, while the latter published it in the continuation of the main news item. The question here is why this news item was not given enough importance or was ignored altogether. One explanation is that al-Quds and al-Ayyam wanted to shed more light on the carnage in Gaza.